



# Women in Leadership



*Their voices, ideas and vision for the future of cheese and dairy.*

**Anja Raudabagh is CEO of Western United Dairies, Turlock, California**

**In an industry with continuous innovation, what inspires you to think creatively and foster creativity among your employees?**

I hire to maximize a diverse range of personality types. For example, introverts are wonderful with numbers and observing personality traits in others that are lost on me. Extroverts are gregarious and usually hyper-focused on results and project completion. It takes all personality types to successfully run a large and diverse association. You need people to see different angles on grants, politics, board dynamics and internal member relations. It can be a real challenge managing these dueling personality types, but the more diverse my staff is and the wider their range of backgrounds are, the stronger we are as an organization to tackle rapidly changing public policy that affects the dairy industry.

**What is a key industry insight you'd share with yourself 10 years ago if you could?**

Don't lose your cool. I come from a mixed martial arts background in the UFC, and aggressively reacting is a survival tactic. But not in the workplace. I wish I could tell myself of 10 years ago that I would have won more fights using tactical strategy than red-face bloviation.

**Is there a product or service you were involved with at Western United Dairies that you're particularly proud of?**

A: A lot of this job has been about putting out fires. These days, success looks like the fewer the fires, the better the strategic planning was that went into it. I am particularly proud of the solutions my executive team and I have come up with to provide the organization maximum security in good or hard times, called "contingency financial planning." Since Western United Dairies (WUD) is a steward of our members' money, making sure that we protected the core function-

ing policy staff of the organization at all times was critical. Other optional expenses, such as consultants and a PAC to execute those core functions, are always presented secondarily. This type of yearly financial planning has allowed WUD to become a political powerhouse because we're focused on how to drive those optional expenses as heavy returns on investment.

**What leadership style do you feel has garnered a positive response throughout your career?**

My education and graduate degrees are in biochemistry with an emphasis on infectious diseases. I have been and will always be overly analytical when evaluating an issue in front of me. This has the tendency to drive some of my colleagues up the wall because I typically don't speak in large group settings and I've learned to have my intentions either pre-planned or will delay a decision until later after I've thought more about it. Sometimes it's not a good thing to talk about what you want, and it's better to see what other people want.

**What is a strategy you've utilized to make sure you, and other women in your organization, are heard?**

I don't dwell on my femineity. People in the agribusiness sector hate that, and they should. If people hear my voice, it's because there is a strategy on the table that either beat them to a pulp or has the potential to help them win. Every day I see women working side by side with their male colleagues on the farm, and it inspires me to add value to the industry in the best ways I can — but it's certainly not because I'm a woman. It's because adding value means producing good strategies, tactics or results that speak for themselves. Being able to tell your board and your members that we won in a challenging state to do business is the most successful strategy I can think of.

**How can the industry motivate the next generation of women to pursue a career in dairy?**

The dairy industry does have its own challenges with putting people

into "boxes." This gal goes into this "box," and they're only allowed to work on "this" project or "these" issues. This has always made me gag. People have so much more insight than they're often given credit for. Traditionally, social media has been the respite for women in agriculture and the rest of the industry readily puts them into that "box," whereas only men lead the political and policy space. This fundamentally must change because it's created a blind spot towards our consumers on all levels. Fundamentally, the farmer is not too far apart from the average consumer; they prioritize animal health and welfare, environmental stewardship and nutrition affordability at the same scale. But how we talk about our values — including where we allow our industry's politics to play a role — goes a long way in reinforcing or diminishing that connection. I challenge the next generation of women to question everything that's ever been put on the table by those that have come before them in understanding our dairy consumers and their politics. There is ALWAYS a better way to do things.

**Do you feel women in the industry are well-represented in trade organizations, educational content and the media? Where do you see gaps?**

Representation has come a long way, and it's nice to see some real women powerhouses leading cooperatives and major marketing labels in the dairy space. Social media also has strong female representation, but keep in mind that agriculture has been shy and quiet as an entire sector to embrace this technology and still wants "Super Bowl ads." That said, the representation of women in the public affairs, political and science policy space isn't just woefully not there — it's discouraged. When you show up to industry meetings on water, methane, nitrate control or the like, women are immediately treated as secretarial note-takers. The reality for California dairy's survival is that all these issues are entirely political and that we must get new messengers who can work within that scope.

**Do you believe the cheese/dairy industry as a whole is supportive of women?**

Of all the public-facing sectors in the dairy industry, the cheese industry is one of the more women-forward. Although artisanal cheesemaking doesn't lead our dairy utilization, the women-led businesses are the faces Sacramento wants to see. Despite being the world's powerhouses for butter and powder, the artisan cheesemaking businesses on the north coast of the state are the seat of the California dairy industry's political power. If this is coming as a surprise or is offensive to folks, that's part of the problem. The raw political muscle the north coast dairy scene brings to all of the environmental decisions the state makes, the drive to be regenerative and renewable, the smallish pasture dairy operations paired with a robust farmers market scene, inspires politicians and consumers alike to work with us on negotiating better business deals. I also think that because marketing is such a driver for these niche products, women naturally sit well in that creative space.

**Who are some dairy industry leaders that inspire you? Did you have any mentors in the industry, and how have they helped you along your career journey?**

In the dairy industry, the people that inspire me most are multi-generational farmers. They always have talented women among them, and I find that more often than not, these farmers evaluate all angles of a problem with a fresher eye than others. That makes my job fun! I enjoy being challenged by our members and seek out opinions that don't reinforce my own. If you treat every interaction like a match with the intention to prevail, you always miss out on the bigger success picture. So I rely heavily on my board to bring challenges to my ideas on a daily basis.

Annie AcMoody has been and will always be one of the best souls I've met in this life. Her wit, talent and unique ability to play a chess match with people in the room holds a candle to none still to this day.

I also credit a good deal of my strategies, snark and thoughtful wisdom to Frank Mendonsa, a talented dairy farmer in Tulare County who believed that WUD could change and that we could succeed as long as the board and the members got "the strategy." CMN